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ABSTRACT

A study explored the additional knowledge and skills an international salesforce needs based upon 95 respondents from Wisconsin manufacturing companies. Six areas were evaluated by sales representatives involved with international sales and marketing to identify the education and training needed within the next 3 years by the work force. Four areas were identified as being more critical: (1) business practices in foreign countries; (2) export/import practices and procedures; (3) product and safety standards; and (4) cultural differences. The majority of manufacturing companies would be expanding into the Canadian, Mexican and Central American, and European regional markets within the next 3 years. The following recommendations for further research were made: to identify additional knowledge and skills, to identify community colleges with international degree programs that currently teach the identified knowledge and skills, and to present study results to community college faculty and those individuals involved with international degree programs. (YLB)

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DEVELOPING CURRICULUM: KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ESSENTIAL FOR AN INTERNATIONAL SALESFORCE

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DEVELOPING CURRICULUM: KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ESSENTIAL FOR AN INTERNATIONAL SALESFORCE

Introduction

The need for a qualified salesforce in the international arena is apparent as the United States increases its international trade initiatives. According to a study conducted by the American Society for Training and Development (cited in Kirkpatrick, 1990) 40% of the respondents said international business is currently a significant part of their business, and 60% reported international business will increase in the next three years. Businesses in the United States are involved internationally through overseas subsidiaries, partners, customers, and as suppliers. Businesses will continue to employ individuals who have some training or working knowledge of the international business arena.

Ohmae stated (as cited in Odenwald, 1993) the global business environment will demand employees who can work effectively across national and cultural boundaries. Businesses who have gone international feel that the knowledge and skills essential for the international salesforce will not be taught as part of the U.S. education system (Odenwald, 1993). These knowledge and skills include an understanding of international business practices, foreign language, government procedures, legal issues, and cultural awareness.

Background

Times are changing with international businesses, and education likewise needs to provide students with an awareness of international education if they are to effectively function as citizens in a democracy. "The need for a citizenry with international knowledge and competencies has long been argued as crucial to this country's national security, economy, and image" (Bailey, Buchanan, & Holleman, 1990, p. 31). Black and Mendenhall's study (as cited in Odenwald, 1993) identified four key areas that employees who conduct business between countries may have difficulties with. They include an understanding of:

1. Monetary systems in which the relative values of currencies fluctuate.

2. Legal systems that vary not only in particulars but in underlying assumptions.

3. Political structures that differ in operation and in how they influence and are influenced by business.

4. Market structures that require subtle changes in products and marketing techniques from country to country.

To be successful in international markets the salesforce will need to have an understanding of government procedures and the legal issues of conducting business in each country. Business transactions due to the insensitivity to cultural norms can be prevented if individuals understand cultural differences. Learning the international business diplomacy is one way for American companies to win in the global market place. Businesses who are diversifying to the global market are increasingly looking to community colleges for answers to foreign language, culture, international business, and international protocol (VanTrease, 1993). VanTrease further stated "if our country is to remain a global leader, our people must be educated by community colleges in international languages, business, and protocol to function and compete in this shrinking world" (p. 2).

Understanding cultural variables is one of the most significant aspects of being successful in any international endeavor. The need to clearly understand communication between members of different cultures is critical. According to Glover (1990) "those who understand the culture are more likely to develop successful, long-term business relationships" (p. 3).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the knowledge and skills that an international salesforce needs. More specifically the study was designed to investigate the knowledge and skills needed in the areas of: (a) business practices of foreign countries, (b) currency exchange rates, (c) export and import practices and procedures, (d) foreign language, (e) product and safety standards, and (f) cultural differences. Additional descriptive information concerning the company's primary line of business, number of employees, company's involvement in international marketing, and world regional export markets were also obtained. Specific research questions included: (1) What additional knowledge and skills will the international salesforce need? (2) To what extent will your company be involved with international marketing? (3) What world regional markets will your company be exporting to in the next three years?

All Wisconsin manufacturing companies comprised the population utilized in this study. A search indicated that the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce Association (WMC) listed over 8,000 Wisconsin manufacturers (WMC Service Corporation, 1991). The sample consisted of Wisconsin manufacturing companies that met the following criteria: (a) manufacturing company located in Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, or Waukesha counties, (b) field salesforce operated from that location, and (c) employed 100 or more employees. Using the criteria identified, a WMC Infosort database search identified 417 Wisconsin manufacturing companies.

Findings

The study was designed to gather information from sales executives within Wisconsin manufacturing companies who had responsibilities for managing the field salesforce. The primary job responsibility of the 95 respondents included 85 (90%) having a sales management position, six (6%) were presidents or general managers of the manufacturing companies, and four (4%) held a variety of positions in human resources, training, and related areas.

The size of the salesforce ranged from zero to 210. Nineteen (20%) respondents indicated they had no representatives for their direct selling efforts. Other salesforces ranged from 47 (49%) companies having between one and ten representatives, 18 (20%) with 11-30, 6 (6%) with 31-50, and 5 (5%) with over 50 sales representatives.

The number of employees within the manufacturing companies ranged from 14 to 7,000. The companies reporting 250 or less employees were 75 (79%) respondents, 11 (12%) reported between 251 and 500 employees, and 9 (9%) respondents reported over 500 employees. The total number of Wisconsin manufacturers that employed 250 or less employees was 95% (WMC Service Corporation, 1991). This accounts for the relatively high number (75%) of respondents reporting 250 or less employees in this study.

Respondents described their company's primary line of manufacturing business by selecting a description of a two-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code. A total of 15 (75%) different descriptions were selected. The response rate by company are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Company's Primary Line of Manufacturing Business

Primary Line	Frequency[a]	Percent
Food and kindred products	6	6.0
Tobacco products	0	0.0
Textile mill products	1	1.0
Apparel and other finished products	1	1.0
Lumber and wood products (except furniture)	1	1.0
Furniture and fixtures	1	1.0
Paper and allied products	2	2.0
Printing, publishing, and allied industries	12	13.0
Chemical and allied products	3	3.0
Petroleum refining and related industries	0	0.0
Rubber and miscellaneous plastics products	5	5.0
Leather and leather products	0	0.0
Stone, clay, glass, and concrete products	0	0.0
Primary metal industries	9	9.0

[a]*n*=95.

(table continues)

Table 1

Company's Primary Line of Manufacturing Business

Primary Line	Frequency[a]	Percent
Fabricated metal industries (except machinery and transportation equipment)	21	22.0
Industrial and commercial machinery and computer equipment	10	11.0
Electronic and other electrical equipment and components (except computer equipment)	9	10.0
Transportation equipment	1	1.0
Measuring, analyzing and controlling instruments; photographic medical and optical goods; watches and clocks	0	0.0
Miscellaneous manufacturing industries	13	14.0

[a] n=95.

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At the current location of the industries surveyed, 36 (38%) manufacturing companies are involved with both the importing and exporting of its products. The other companies involved in international marketing included: (a) those who exported only, 33 (35%); (b) imported only, 2 (2%); and (c) one (1%) industry reporting "other" involvement. Twenty (21%) manufacturing companies were not involved with any import or export activities at the time of this study. Three (3%) companies did not respond. When combining the companies directly involved with exporting, total respondents were 69 (73%). This includes the manufacturing companies reporting exporting (35%), and importing and exporting (38%).

Respondents were asked to identify the additional knowledge and skills the international salesforce would need in the next three years. An understanding of business practices of foreign countries was most frequently reported by 52 (55%) respondents. Table 2 shows the frequency of the knowledge and skills reported by the manufacturing companies.

Table 2

Essential Knowledge and Skills of International Salesforce

Knowledge and skills	Frequency	Percent
Business practices of foreign countries	52	55
Export/import practices and procedures	46	48
Understanding cultural differences	46	48
Product and safety standards for foreign markets	41	43
Currency exchange rates and their impact	31	33
Foreign language training	25	26

With regard to the last research question, 76 (80%) of the manufacturing companies indicated within the next three years, they would be involved with exporting from its Wisconsin operation into the Canadian regional market. Other world regional markets identified by the manufacturing companies are presented in Table 3.

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Table 3

World Regional Markets Manufacturing Company's will be Involved with Exporting

World regional markets	Frequency	Percent
Canada	76	80
Mexico and Central America	66	69
European Countries	57	60
Pacific Rim	45	47
South America	36	38
Middle East	31	33
Russia	15	16
Other	5	5

Conclusions

This study explored the additional knowledge and skills an international salesforce needs based upon respondents from Wisconsin manufacturing companies. Six areas were evaluated by sales representatives involved with international sales and marketing as to the education and training needed within the next three years by the workforce. Four areas were identified as being more critical and included the knowledge of: (a) business practices in foreign countries, (b) export/import practices and procedures, (c) product and safety standards, and (d) cultural differences. Based upon the results from this study, the following conclusions are presented:

1. The findings described in this study were unique to Wisconsin manufacturing companies. Of the essential knowledge and skills identified for the international salesforce, an understanding of business practices within foreign countries (52%) was listed as most important. In support of this conclusion, it is imperative that program requirements be reviewed to determine if foreign business practices are currently included in courses.

2. The majority of manufacturing companies will be expanding into the Canadian (80%), Mexico and Central America (69%), and European (60%) regional markets within the next three years. Therefore, it seems appropriate that a course, discussing these regional markets and their exporting opportunities be offered in the international degree program.

3. Finally, results indicate that 73% of the manufacturing companies are directly involved with exporting products. Therefore, it might be speculated that a stand alone course titled "Exporting" be offered.

Recommendations

Based upon the results from this study, several recommendations can be made with regard to the integration of essential knowledge and skills in preparing an international salesforce. The recommendations include:

1. The research format used in this study be replicated in other states where community college international degree programs exist. Are the international salesforce needs for training in Wisconsin manufacturing companies similar to manufacturing companies in other states?

2. Additional research be conducted to identify additional knowledge and skills needed for individuals preparing for an occupation in the international sales and marketing arena.

3. Research be conducted to identify community colleges with international degree programs that currently teach the knowledge and skills identified from this study. What results, if any, support the fact that the salesforce is better prepared to enter international sales?

4. Since few studies have been conducted to identify essential curriculum content for international degree programs, further research is needed to better serve companies in the preparation of a skilled international salesforce.

5. Results from this study be presented to community college faculty and those individuals involved with international degree programs. Recognizing the knowledge and skills identified from this study, can assist educators in redesigning curriculum content to include recommendations from the manufacturing companies.

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